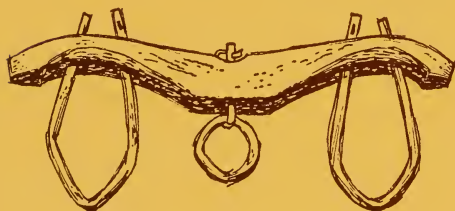


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Vaught, Edgar
An address delivered in
Redlands, California,
February 14, 1937

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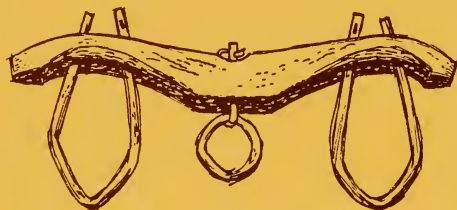
Edgar S. Vaught
United States District Judge
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



Delivered at the
Redlands Lincoln Anniversary Exercises
Fox Redlands Theater
Redlands, California, February 14, 1937

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Abraham Lincoln

An Inspiration to American Youth

THE landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock marked a new era in our civilization. The desire for religious liberty has always been strong in the human heart. To accomplish this, men and women in all ages have endured hardships, privations and even death. The little band of immigrants, who came over in the Mayflower, had one purpose—the establishment of a colony where one might be permitted to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

It was one of the strong incentives in the American Revolution, and finally found its place firmly embedded in our government, and its protection and permanence were assured by incorporating it into the Constitution of the United States. Our Revolutionary Fathers not only preserved this element of personal liberty, but early turned their attention to the development and protection of civil rights.

The Declaration of Independence declares: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

It is not contended by thoughtful men that the statement “all men are created equal” has reference to anything other than that all men should possess equal opportunities. That is, that all opportunities are open to every class of individuals, and while individuals may vary in their ability to take advantage of opportunities, to possess property, to pursue happi-

ness, and to exercise all their civil and religious rights, nevertheless, the same opportunities are open to the rich and the poor, to those of unusual ability and those of meager ability.

The first amendment to the Constitution provides: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

These principles, so definitely and firmly established in the fundamental law of our land, are the source of the growth and development of individual liberty in America.

We have witnessed struggles from poverty to eminence. We have seen those with meager opportunities for education and culture, through their own personal efforts, climb to heights in these accomplishments.

In this progressive age of ours, the youth of today is frequently met with the proposition that the same opportunities do not exist as existed a century, a half century, or even a decade ago. It is even contended that it requires wealth to accumulate wealth; that it requires special advantages to secure an acknowledged position in society; that it requires financial ability and the facilities offered in our higher institutions of learning, to achieve culture and education. But such is not the case. Opportunities are as open today to the youth who is willing to pay the price in personal sacrifice, patience and application as were open to those who accomplished so much a generation or more ago.

The most laudable example of advancement from poverty to the highest position in the gift of the American people, is found in the life of Abraham Lincoln.

Born in a log cabin in the mountains of Kentucky, of Virginia parents, in practical obscurity and in abject poverty, Abraham Lincoln started his great struggle for success. He was not, as has been contended by some, born of parents who were commonly known as "poor whites" but Lincoln had a background of which he was proud. His paternal grandfather, also named Abraham, immigrated from Rockingham County, Virginia, to Kentucky about 1782. The Lincoln family was a distinguished family in Virginia and while Lincoln, in his autobiography states that he was descended from an "undistinguished family", yet this is due more to his own modesty than to the facts in the case.

Lincoln, himself, however, knew the direst want. His parents had few of the conveniences of home life. They subsisted upon the most common and ordinary food. His clothes were of the cheapest variety. His father, from early boyhood because of his privations, became more of a wandering laborer than a stable member of society. This, however, was due more to his environment in youth than his inherited qualities of character. Nancy Hanks, Lincoln's mother, was from respectable lineage. Respect for law, the integrity of the home, the fundamental principles of morality and right-living, were dominant in his early life.

As a youth, he had no educational advantages. The schools, which he was permitted to attend, were mere make-shifts and schools rather in name than in fact. Occasionally, however, he had a teacher whose personality impressed him and at an early age, he developed a desire for the acquisition of knowledge. He was a constant reader and there were few books within the range of a dozen miles of his home, which Lincoln had not read.

He early matured physically. He was tall, gaunt, ungainly in appearance, but powerful in strength. His personal appearance and his manner of dress were often the cause for intense personal embarrassment and humiliation.

He possessed an unconquerable desire to press forward and though the positions which he was able to secure, even after he had attained his majority, were such as hard work on a farm, on river boats, or similar occupations, they tested his strength and perseverance. After he had grown to manhood, he determined that he would be something more than a common laborer on a farm or a deck-hand on a boat, and applied himself assiduously to the study of mathematics, history, literature and government. He early began the study of law. He was surveyor of his county, and before he was thirty years of age had served three terms in the state legislature of Illinois. Those experiences brought him in contact with an entirely different class of men and women than those he had known before. He came in contact with brilliant minds, with students of government, with men eminent and accomplished in their professions and all these contacts, instead of discouraging Lincoln, merely served to spur him on in his greater ambitions.

Lincoln became a profound lawyer, not an accomplished one. He possessed an abundance of common sense. He was a good judge of men. He understood a jury and the manner in which an appeal could be made intelligible to a jury. It was not Lincoln's purpose to deceive the jury, nor to mislead the jury, but he found his greatest delight in so presenting and marshaling his facts as to make the right impression. Lincoln's purpose was to win his case on its merits and in the voluminous record that has been handed down to us from different sources, as to the amount and character of legal busi-

ness handled by Lincoln, there is not a single case, so far as my investigation discloses, in which Lincoln found pride or consolation in winning a law suit which he should not have won. He appealed to the judgment of his jurors rather than their prejudices. He was what would be known, even today, as a safe lawyer.

Before he was forty years of age he was engaged with Stephen A. Douglas in a series of debates which challenged the attention of the people of the nation, and notwithstanding the fact that Senator Douglas was a man of unusual ability, of splendid education, a great lawyer, Lincoln's addresses do not suffer by comparison with those of Senator Douglas or any other public speaker of his day.

At a comparatively early age he was elected to Congress. This opened a new world to him. His definite conception of constitutional government and of the possibilities of this nation, was not enjoyed by many of the prominent men of his day. Lincoln was positive in his convictions, clear and emphatic in the pronouncement of his position on all public questions. He loved politics, yet he was never a politician. He sought public office but in so doing he was inspired by the opportunity to render a public service rather than to satisfy a selfish desire. His whole career impresses one with the fundamental soundness of his position on public questions and his anxiety to serve rather than to be served.

When slightly more than fifty years of age, he was elected President of the United States. Thus in a half century we witness a poor, friendless, struggling youth completing the journey from a log cabin to the White House.

I know of no greater inspiration to the American youth of today than the personal accomplishments of Abraham Lin-

coln. He is today known in foreign lands, as he is known at home, as the Great Commoner. A man, who loved the people, who sympathized with and found his greatest pleasure in rendering assistance to those in distress. He was never offensively ambitious. He even questioned his own ability and fitness for the presidency of the United States but his rugged honesty and personal integrity, coupled with his fearless advocacy of those principles in which he believed, early made him a popular candidate.

Lincoln was great before he knew it. He stood much higher in the estimation of the people and his associates than he did in his own estimation. It has been contended by some of the greatest men of the period in which he lived that Lincoln was inspired, that he was actually created for the peculiar service which he rendered to the nation. Lincoln, through his own efforts and through a combination of circumstances, was prepared for such a service and when the opportunity came to render the service, he was not found unprepared. It was extremely fortunate for the nation that in the particular period in which he lived, Lincoln was available for the great service which he rendered. I am not prepared to say that had not Lincoln lived someone else would not have been found, capable of rendering this service.

Lincoln's life should stand today as a beacon light to every struggling youth in America. The discouraged, the impoverished, those forced to make personal sacrifice should find inspiration and consolation in the achievements of this Kentucky youth.

I have little sympathy for those today who would discourage American youth by suggesting that there is no longer any opportunity for those without a "pull" of some

character. I would not take the position that it is possible for every boy to be President of the United States. One does not have to be President of the United States in order to achieve success. Many of the most successful men of our nation are those who have never been heard of outside of the community in which they live. But they have lived, reared families of which they and the community could be proud, and contributed to the oncoming generation, sons and daughters who have been able to take their places as honest, God-fearing, law-abiding citizens.

The life, character and achievements of Lincoln should be held continuously before America's youth. No argument is so powerful as a completed demonstration. Lincoln has given to this nation and to the world a practical demonstration of how one can actually climb from the bottom to the top.

When Lincoln was practicing law, riding the circuit with other lawyers, he was known as "Honest Old Abe." Not an old man, not yet fifty, and yet this appellation was given him by those who knew him, as a tribute to his fundamental honesty.

Our educational systems in America might do worse than to emphasize in a most material way, day by day, the great examples of personal success in our own nation's history. As a people, we have never suffered because of having learned the story of Washington and his early days. The story of the cherry tree, a generation ago was known in every household. The simple characteristics connected with the lives of other great men were made the basis for study and inspiration.

Lincoln's attitude upon the slavery question was far in advance of that of other public men of his day. Many of the most prominent statesmen were willing to settle the slavery

question by making concessions which would secure only a temporary disposition of the matter.

Lincoln, however, took a broader view. He took the position that slavery, as an institution, was wrong; that the very principle of slavery was abhorrent; and, that this nation could not survive, half slave and half free.

Neither of these positions was such as would advance his political prospects. Yet they did appeal to the very hearts and souls of the thinking men and women of America. Many of the people of the South were as anxious for a permanent settlement of the slavery question as were those in the North and Lincoln's positive position appealed to them.

There was no element of selfishness in Lincoln's platform. There was an element of revolution but Lincoln emphasized the necessity of bringing this question to a crisis.

His election to the presidency brought the crisis. The crisis was reached and passed. Lincoln's prophecy came true. The Union still lives and a mighty Nation exists where, had Lincoln, and those believing as he did, failed, a dozen, helpless nations might have existed.

Few men in public life have given to the nation examples of such pure English, choice diction and clear reasoning as did Lincoln. His letters, public addresses and state papers evince a mastery of the English language possessed by few in his day. His Gettysburg Address stands out as a gem of literary production. Another example of Lincoln's literary ability is exhibited in a letter which he wrote to a mother, who had given five sons to die in the Union Army. This letter not only discloses the highest patriotism and the purest motives for living but is appropriate to the occasion, and is regarded as

such a brilliant literary production that Oxford University, England, has the letter framed and hanging on the walls of Brasenose College, as a model of purest English, rarely, if ever, surpassed. May I quote the letter?

“Executive Mansion,

“Washington, Nov. 21, 1864

“To Mrs. Bixby, Boston, Mass.

“Dear Madam.

“I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

“Yours very sincerely and respectfully

“A. Lincoln.”

In celebrating today the birth, the life and the achievements of Abraham Lincoln, we can pay no higher tribute to the qualities of this great man than to emphasize, cherish and cite with approval these qualities to the present generation.

The conditions of our nation, socially, politically and financially, call for the highest type and character of leadership. We cannot substitute for safe leadership, speculative experimentation. Great questions cannot be solved except by the application of sound thinking and reasoning. The present

generation has no higher function to perform than to produce and have in readiness able, sane and competent leaders.

There is majesty in a rugged mountain peak; there is grandeur in a vast limitless plain; there is power in the thunder's roar, the ocean's wave, or an onrushing current; there is beauty in sparkling streams and the music of birds; yet this majesty, grandeur, power and beauty are all combined in the positive character of a great individual.

The growth and development of a great character are not unlike the growth and development of a great nation. How like our own America in growth and maturity after all was Lincoln. Our nation, in its infancy, weak, ungainly, yet with age acquiring power and form, stands forth in its maturity a tower of strength, the natural defender of religious and civil liberty.

This necessity for great leaders has been beautifully emphasized by Josiah Gilbert Holland:

“God give us men! A time like this demands
Strong minds, great hearts, true faith, and ready
hands;
Men whom the lust of office does not kill;
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy;
Men who possess opinions and a will;
Men who have honor—men who will not lie.
Men who can stand before a demagogue
And damn his treacherous flatteries without
winking;
Tall men, sun-crowned, who live above the fog
In public duty and in private thinking.
For while the rabble, with their thumbworn creeds,
Their large professions and their little deeds,
Mingle in selfish strife, lo! Freedom weeps,
Wrong rules the land, and waiting Justice sleeps.”



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